CHAPTER TWO

THE CULT OF THE SUN AND THE MOON
AT PALMYRA

Yarhibol

The god was the patron of the spring of Efca at Palmyra (Pl. XII: 1, 2). He must have played this role since the Amorites, the first known inhabitants of the area, settled in the neighborhood of the spring. Yarhibol was the idol of the spring: mšb’ dy ‘yn’, as an inscription on a relief of gypsum found at Dura-Europos states (Inv. D-E 33). The relief (Pl. X) shows Yarhibol in military dress, standing with his right hand raised to grasp a lance while the left grips the hilt of a sword. The god, his head radiate, has a crescent on his shoulders, but this symbol should not support the conclusion that Yarhibol was a lunar god: nimbus, rays, and crescent in the Palmyrene iconography may require a different explanation in each case. In the well-known relief in the Louvre Museum (Pl. VIII) that portrays the so-called triad of Baal Shamin the figure at the right of Baal Shamin wears a crescent across his radiate nimbus (Colledge, Art of Palmyra, p. 44). Here, the lunar character of the acolyte cannot be questioned since Baal Shamin is a cosmic god to whom the sun and the moon belong (Pagan God, pp. 141-142). This is not the case in other monuments where the crescent is represented beneath the radiate nimbus: for instance, on a Palmyrene relief, published by Seyrig in Syria 36 (1959) 58-60, pl. XI: 5, which shows the bust of a young god with a radiate head, a crescent on the shoulders, and a snake in the upper right corner of the panel. The most interesting feature of this monument is the representation of seven little figures with spears (?) engraved obliquely behind them. The figures occupy the lower register of the relief. At the bottom a Greek inscription of A.D. 30/31 identifies the god as Helios. The authors who have mentioned this relief have failed to compare the motif of the seven figures to a similar motif appearing on the Mithraic relief of Brigetio, in Pannonia; see CIMRM
Here, below the familiar scene of Mithras Tauroctonus and separated by two horizontal lines, are the busts of seven figures that may represent the planets. The relief of Yarhibol from Dura-Europos (Pl. X) can also be compared to the figure of a young god with a radiate nimbus and a crescent on the shoulders represented on a medallion in the Cabinet des Médailles (Paris); see Drijvers, Religion of Palmyra, pl. XVII. According to the Palmyrene inscription incised to the left of the deity, the medallion was dedicated to Baal Shamin (Gawlikowski, Semitica 23 [1973] 121-123).

This last relief, like those of Yarhibol and Helios, has raised some questions among the scholars who contend that the crescent, a lunar symbol par excellence, could not accompany the Sun god. In fact, the radiate nimbus with the crescent forms a symbolic unity, and the whole may well stand for the heavens. At Commagene during the reign of Antiochus I (70-35 B.C.) Apollo and Helios were equated with Mithras (Waldmann, Die Kommagenischen Kultreformen, pp. 145-149). In the iconography of the last, the separate representation of the busts of the Sun and the Moon constitutes a familiar feature of the tauroctony. Dura-Europos, however, offers an interesting exception in an early Mithraic relief (Pl. XI) dated March, 169 (Inv. D-E 19). Above the scene of the killing of the bull both a star within a crescent and a rosette take the place of the usual busts of Sol and Luna (Perkins, Art of Dura-Europos, pp. 84-86). Whatever the meaning of the two astral symbols (moon and sun, or sun and moon and a star) may be, it is not unlikely that in a city as much influenced by Parthian culture as Dura-Europos (Pl. IX) the cosmic role of Mithras/Apollo was lent to Yarhibol, the Sun god of the triad of Bel at Palmyra. Centuries earlier the cosmic function of Sadrafa, a Semitic Apollo, was made apparent on the stele from Amrit (Pl. XXXIV) by the disk within the crescent that surmounts the figure of the deity (see below, p. 103).

In the inscription on the relief depicting Yarhibol (Pl. X) the interpretation of the term $m\#b$' as "idol" is confirmed by two inscriptions that mention "the priest of the idol of the spring" (‘$pkl\ 'dy m\#b 'yn’; CISem. II, 4064, 4065). In his capacity of Lord